

REVIEW

Neta Stahl

Other and Brother:

Jesus in the 20th Century Jewish Literary Landscape
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Neta Stahl's new book takes its place alongside recent work by Matthew Hoffman and Daniel Boyarin exploring reflections on Jesus as a historical and symbolic figure in Jewish thought and culture. Her study offers an erudite and generally accessible analysis of key texts and authors, many of which are unavailable in English translation. The claim that "the figure of Jesus embodied an internal Jewish attempt to redefine Jewish selfhood by reclaiming Jesus for Jewish nationalism" (p. 10) is borne out of close readings of 19th-century Hebrew texts in Eastern Europe, early 20th-century Yiddish writing in Europe and the United States, and Hebrew literature in the pre-state and post-1948 periods. Stahl draws briefly on psychoanalytic and postcolonial models of Self and Other in her introductory pages, but the imported theoretical frame seems largely unnecessary, even redundant, given the razor-sharp insight brought to the topic by her literary interlocutors. It may come as a surprise to contemporary readers that Jesus played such a lively and central role in the modernist literary Jewish imagination, but, indeed, his appearance is ubiquitous across a wide variety of cultural discourses. Different aspects of his life, especially his suffering, persecution and personal geography, provided important touchstones for Jewish *belle lettres*. Stahl's study persuasively argues that the historical Jesus is key for the modern Jewish psyche.

The first chapter lays the historical and cultural groundwork, exploring foundational texts such as Joseph Klausner's *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times and Teaching* (Hebrew, 1922) and

Sholem Asch's *The Nazarene* (originally written in Yiddish but first published in English in 1939). Klausner's important distinction between Christianity's Jesus and what he considered a more "authentic" historical Jesus set the stage for later literary treatments. According to Stahl, this distinction "was used to emphasize the dichotomy between Christian persecutors and their Jewish victim" (p. 33). Modern Yiddish writing such as Lamed Shapiro's story "The Cross" (1909) included references to the crucifixion within scenes of trauma and anti-semitic violence. Yet Jesus was also a paragon of morality and strength for many Hebrew writers and artists. Devoted to depicting a modern, rehabilitated Jew—a "new Hebrew"—these writers were drawn to the *realia* of Jesus' depiction in the Gospels. His physical travails within the Palestinian landscape served as an example for the agricultural pioneers depicted in Avraham Shlonsky's symbolist Hebrew poetry in the 1920s.

Chapter two reviews the work of Uri Zvi Grinberg, a complex figure whose lifelong dialogue with Christian motifs spanned his Yiddish writing in Poland during World War I to his post-Holocaust Hebrew writing in Israel. His poem "Uri Tsvi in front of the Cross INRI" (Yiddish, 1922), which appeared typographically in the shape of a cross (its image appears on the cover of Stahl's book), is perhaps the most provocative, if not the best-known, evocation of Jesus by a modern Jewish writer. The poem's first-person voice ("I am wrapped up, brother Jesus, wrapped up Jewish skin and bones"), traces the distinction between "Jesus' lost Jewish Self and his identity as a Christian idol" (p. 60). Grinberg's recuperative rescue of Jesus for the messianic Jewish imagination rivals that of his contemporary, Marc Chagall. Both artists were interested in the creative tension produced through the act of imaginatively inhabiting what was for many Jews the ultimate Other.

Chapter three surveys the figure of Jesus in Israeli literature. Unlike their European predecessors, Israeli Hebrew writers approached the figure of Jesus with little ambivalence. Though they, too, were drawn to his life, according to Stahl, as emblematic of "the long-suffering Other," this estrangement took

another form: “This alterity of Jesus is the otherness of those who are different—nonconformists—and in many poems the artists themselves” (p. 125). These native, largely secular writers had little truck with the potential stigma and antisemitism often associated with Christianity for European Jewish writers. In their works, Jesus appears as an apocryphal, almost fantastical character in the erotic, elliptical poems of Yona Wolloch, one of the most influential and polarizing figures in Israeli culture. Chapters four and five profile two European-born Israeli writers, the novelist Yoel Hoffman and the poet Avot Yeshurun. While both are canonical figures, the difficulty of their work has rendered them largely marginal within the broader cultural arena. Indeed, we may note (though Stahl does not) the gradual diminishment of Jesus as a figure of fascination for Israeli writers, as other forms of cultural and ethnic difference came to preoccupy the Israeli imagination, especially in the years following the 1973 war and later in the post-Oslo period.

The book’s epilogue is organized around the trope of irony, and Stahl skips from a reading of *Toldot Yeshu*, a Hebrew satiric text composed somewhere between the 3rd and 7th centuries—largely viewed as kind of “counter-history” to the Gospels—to a selection of modern Hebrew and Yiddish texts which also mock or treat Jesus’ suffering in ironic fashion. This concluding chapter reads as a lively reiteration of the book’s central themes, with a focus on irony and difference, as opposed to the sympathy and affinity expressed by the writers studied in the earlier chapters.

Despite its considerable virtues, this reviewer is troubled by the degree to which Stahl’s book seems largely to conflate the category of Jewishness (as in the “Jewish literary landscape” of its title) with modern Hebrew culture, especially, and Israeli-Jewish identity, eventually. To be fair, and as the book amply illustrates, the figure of Jesus—his suffering, victimhood, and Jewish roots—is of enormous importance to 20th-century Jewish culture, many of whose practitioners chose to write in Hebrew and in Yiddish. But what of those who did not? Is there no comparable Jesus in German-Jewish writing (poetry by Else

Lasker Shuler and Paul Celan comes to mind)? And what of the epic rendering of a Jewish Jesus in New York in Henry Roth's *Call it Sleep* (1937)? Or texts by Alfred Kazin and Emma Lazarus that also refer, obliquely or otherwise, to a Jesus figure? Stahl's arguments concern one particular set of currents within modern Jewish experience that culminated in the establishment of a national homeland. Her arguments would only be further illuminated through comparison with other, equally characteristic, diasporic cultural forms. Admittedly, that would be another book, one that would more faithfully and fully depict the "20th century Jewish literary landscape." Indeed, readers of Stahl's book may savor its insights, and their relevance for contemporary Jewish-Christian relations, but the landscape on display here consists of a very specific topography, a fascinating but limited slice of a more diverse geography.